

# FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION PHOTOGRAPHS IN INDIANA

## A STUDY GUIDE



Roy Stryker Told the FSA Photographers  
*“Show the city people what it is like to live on the  
farm.”*

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## **Introduction**

This study guide is meant to provide an overall history of the Farm Security Administration and its photographic project in Indiana. It also provides background information, which can be used by students as they carry out the curriculum activities. Along with the curriculum resources, the study guide provides a basis for studying the history of the photos taken in Indiana by the FSA photographers.

## **The FSA - OWI Photographic Collection at the Library of Congress**

The photographs of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) - Office of War Information (OWI) Photograph Collection at the Library of Congress form a large-scale photographic record of American life between 1935 and 1944. The collection encompasses the images made by photographers working in Roy Stryker's Historical Section as it existed in a succession of government agencies: the Resettlement Administration (1935-1937), the Farm Security Administration (1937-1942), and the Office of War Information (1942-1945). The collection also includes photographs acquired from other governmental agencies, including the News Bureau at the Office of Emergency Management and various branches of the military, as well as nongovernmental sources. The total collection consists of about 164,000 black-and-white film negatives and transparencies, 1,610 color transparencies, and approximately 107,000 black-and-white photographic prints. The black-and-white photographic prints consist of about 77,000 images produced by photographers under Stryker's direction and about 30,000 photographs acquired from other sources.

## **Great Depression and Farms**

Between 1931 and 1940, the nonfarm jobless rate never fell below 21%. In no year in the 1930s would the unemployment rate fall below 14% and the average for the decade as a whole was 17.1 %. Workers under the age of 20 or over 60 were twice as likely to be out of a job. A study commissioned by Harry Hopkins, Director of the Works Progress Administration, found that unemployment affected most heavily the young, elderly, least educated, unskilled and rural Americans.

The time period from 1900 to 1910 is known as the golden age of American agriculture. But farm mortgages doubled between 1910 and 1920 from \$3.3 to \$6.7 billion. After the Armistice in 1918 farm prices plummeted. For farmers the depression started with the end of the wartime boom of the First World War. There was a steep decline in agricultural prices. For example, cotton went from wartime high of 35 cents per pound to 16 cents in 1920. In the 1920s per capita farm income was one-third the national average. The agricultural depression was not a result of

the 1929 crash, for on the farm the Great Depression was well into its second decade. In addition to declining crop prices, the causes of the problem also included:

- Crop overproduction
- Extremely high farm debt
- Disappearing foreign markets
- Changing domestic markets
- Droughts and floods

Rural poverty had been spreading and intensifying the entire decade of the 1920s. Many farmers had to sell their land. Sharecropping increased throughout the country, especially in the South. Over-farming led to erosion. The most pressing problem was the plunge in the standard of living among many farm families.

In 1930, 49% of all Americans lived in communities of less than 8,000 and 45% in rural areas of less than 2,500. Forty-seven percent or nearly 3 million farmers lived in poverty. Only one in ten farms had electricity.

In 1932, the annual net farm income dropped from \$56.1 billion in 1929 to \$2 billion. Wheat dropped to 23 cents a bushel, the lowest in 200 years. There were 533,000 more migrations to the countryside from urban areas than vice versa.

In 1933, the value of farm goods dropped 62% since the stock market crash to its lowest point in February. The value of farm property dropped from \$57.7 million in 1929 to \$36.3 million. Farm income was less than one third of the already depressed 1929 figure. Nearly 45 % of farms were behind in their mortgages and faced foreclosure.

Poverty was more visible in cities and the rural poor were often overlooked in the rustic beauty of the countryside. Historically, rural poverty was a private matter. No programs existed for social welfare in rural areas. The need for relief and rehabilitation programs was looked upon with ambivalence and embarrassment. Farmers still constituted 30% of the nation's workforce, a significant sector that was in jeopardy.

## **Roosevelt and Rural America**

Franklin Roosevelt had a strong affinity for farmers. While Governor of New York, he gave a speech in Indianapolis in June 1931 at the Annual Governors' Conference entitled "Acres Fit and Unfit: State Planning of Land Use for Industry and Agriculture." He believed that industrial recovery would depend on the revival of agricultural purchasing power and the nation's prosperity rested on an agricultural base. He felt that what was good for the farmer was good for the country and that poor land created poor people. Roosevelt also believed that the quality of

farm life was a key indicator of American character and crucial to recovery. He cherished the old agrarian conviction that rural life sustained both individual character and community.

In 1932 while campaigning for the presidency, Roosevelt reminded voters that New York was not just tall buildings but a farm state, first in the nation in income from dairy cows and hay, second in production of apples and grapes, and sixth in overall farm income. He even listed himself in *Who's Who* as a tree farmer. He considered himself a sort of a gentleman farmer, harvesting trees and selling some at Christmas time. He started conservation efforts at Springwood, his home at Hyde Park, in 1910 and by his death in 1945 had overseen the planting of half a million trees on 556 acres.

In a 1936 campaign speech President Roosevelt praised “the American farmer, living on his own land” as “our ideal of self-reliance and of spiritual balance - the source from which the reservoirs of the Nation’s strength are constantly renewed.”

## **Creation of the Resettlement Administration**

In 1935 President Roosevelt consolidated several farm programs into the Resettlement Administration by Executive Order and named Rexford Tugwell as Head. Tugwell was a professor of economics at Columbia University, who became an advisor to Roosevelt during his campaign for the presidency in 1932. He was part of Roosevelt’s original Brains Trust. In 1933 he was appointed to the Department of Agriculture and served as Undersecretary. He helped to create the Agricultural Adjustment Administration and was its Director, until taking over the Resettlement Administration. Tugwell advocated government planning and economic intervention to improve living conditions in rural America and to reduce rural poverty. Tugwell talked about the importance of government, industry and agriculture working together, in what he called a “concert of interests.” The reform of agriculture through planning in the interest of efficiency was the ultimate aim. Tugwell resigned from the Resettlement Administration at the end of 1936. He later served as the Director of the New York City Planning Commission, the last appointed Governor of Puerto Rico from 1941 to 1946, where he wanted to establish a photographic project like the FSA’s. He eventually returned to academia.

## **Creation of the Farm Security Administration**

In 1937 Congress passed the Farm Security Act, which folded the Resettlement Administration into a new body, the Farm Security Administration (FSA), which operated until 1942. The aim was to take millions of acres of unproductive land owned by farmers that had been exhausted by deforestation, over-farming, and drought and resettle families on better land into communities planned by the agency, including homesteads, model farms and greenbelt towns. The goal was to resettle 450,000 families, but only 10,000 to 12,000 were ever resettled. The FSA sought to

establish cooperative farm communities of small landowners reflecting the frontier spirit of sharing. Farmers would live together under the guidance of government experts and learn more efficient farming methods. The FSA was created to rescue the chronic rural poor, receiving little or no benefits. The chronic rural poor included subsistence farmers living on marginal land, migratory farm laborers and tenants and sharecroppers.

President Roosevelt's early agricultural policy had been to try to decrease agricultural production and increase prices. But what many renters really wanted was financial aid to purchase farms. The Department of Agriculture did not have a program to help farmers to buy farms. Then in 1937, with funds from the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act, the FSA was able to help tenant farmers purchase farms.

The FSA had four main tasks: resettlement, rehabilitation, land utilization and technical assistance.

Resettlement was the least costly but most controversial. The aim was to:

- Relocate impoverished farmers to new rural communities and relocate the urban poor to suburbs
- Build model cooperative farmsteads, subsistence homesteads and greenbelt towns
- Help tenant farmers purchase or enlarge farms with funds from the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant Act

Rehabilitation was most costly but least controversial. The aim was to:

- Administer emergency loans at low rates to buy or improve farms
- Give loans for feed, seed, fertilizer, livestock, equipment and repairs
- Provide emergency grants for natural disasters and relief
- Settle farm debt adjustment cases

The aim of land utilization was to:

- Battle soil erosion and promote soil conservation
- Take the worst land out of production and resettle displaced farmers
- Buy substandard, submarginal land and convert to more appropriate uses

The aim of technical assistance was to:

- Give educational aid to farm families
- Provide demonstrations, instruction and supervision
- Provide training in basic business skills and bookkeeping
- Teach classes in the areas of home economics and child rising
- Develop other related businesses

The magic ingredients that were supposed change rural America were cooperation, education, financial help and expert supervision.

## **Organization of the FSA**

The Resettlement Administration, later the FSA, started with twelve employees and by end of the year it had 16,386. Approximately 4,200 employees came from nine other agencies. The staff ultimately numbered 19,000 and was in every state. Seventy-five percent were employed outside Washington, D.C. There were twelve regional offices, plus Puerto Rico. There were district offices in each state, with county offices as well. The FSA employed over 4,000 rural rehabilitation and home management supervisors. Other staff included lawyers, accountants, statisticians, doctors, nurses, soil engineers, teachers, sociologists, political scientists, economists, and specialists in farm management, sanitation, public health and preventive medicine. In 1941, Theodore Schultz, who later won the Nobel Prize in Economics, reported that the FSA led all other federal agencies in the number of personnel with training or education in the social sciences.

In essence the FSA county supervisor was a teacher, banker, farm expert, family case worker and community organizer. The county offices were very active at the local level and interacted with numerous government agencies, including the Soil Conservation Service, Works Progress Administration, Farm Credit Administration, Agricultural Adjustment Administration, National Youth Administration, Agricultural Extensions and local elected officials. They also worked closely with local teachers, bankers, ministers, civic and farm organization leaders, health and hospital officials, and relief and welfare workers.

## **Historical Section of the FSA**

There were five Sections in the Information Division: Historical, Radio, Documentary Film, Special Publications and Editorial. The Information Division maintained offices in each region, coordinated in Washington, D.C., but under the supervision of Regional directors. The Information Division of the FSA was responsible for providing educational and press information to the public and government. The official job description was:

To direct the activities of investigators, photographers, economists, sociologists and statisticians engaged in the accumulation and compilation of reports, statistics, photographic material, vital statistics, agricultural surveys, maps and sketches necessary to make accurate descriptions of the various phases of the Resettlement Administration, particularly with regard to the historical, sociological and economic aspects of the several programs and their accomplishments.

In 1935 Tugwell appointed his former Columbia University student Roy Stryker in charge of the Historical Section in the Information Division of the FSA. The Historical Section's headquarters was located in Washington, D.C. The Historical Section hired staff, drafted budgets and allocated travel funds. They also distributed film and equipment. The staff at headquarters developed, printed, and numbered negatives. The headquarters also distributed images to newspapers, magazines, publishers and government agencies. Over the summer months of 1938 Stryker estimated that his lab processed 7,000 prints for the FSA and other clients. In 1940 more than 1,400 images appeared in publications each month.

A Committee on Exhibits, made up of one member from each of the divisions concerned with exhibits, also put together photo exhibits. A technical subcommittee, including the Chief of the Historical Section, was set up to execute approved exhibits. Exhibits were a form of advocacy education. The exhibits were designed by the Special Skills Division and the Historical Section of the Information Division.

The exhibits fell into three groups. Large scale exhibits for expositions included the: California Pacific International Exposition in San Diego, Texas Centennial Exposition in Dallas and Great Lakes Exposition in Cleveland. The second category was for smaller conferences, conventions and meeting such as the: Columbia Teachers Meeting, National Conference of Social Workers and Museum of Modern Art. The last category was a standard panel exhibit covering the programs of the agency. It was designed to be easily handled and shipped and adaptable to presentation under varying conditions. It was reproduced for each region. They showed exhibits at county fairs, libraries, and other types of local meetings, such as 4H Clubs. It was also reproduced as an under the arm photographic portfolio for individual travel by county employees.

The Historical Section had a photographic lab and darkroom. Usually no more than six photographers were employed at any one time. They were compensated about \$2,300 to \$3,200 per year. Stryker's staff never exceeded 28, with lab technicians and clerical staff outnumbering photographers. The low point was ten in 1937. In 1941 and 1942 Stryker estimated that his budget was between \$67,000 and \$68,000 with two-thirds going for salaries. This was when total expenditures for the entire FSA exceeded a billion dollars.

The Information Division of the FSA was responsible for providing educational and press information to the public and government agencies. Under Stryker, the Historical Section adopted the goal of "introducing America to Americans." Stryker hired photographers to document the plight of the rural poor. For example, one of Stryker's plans was to photograph migrant workers in a way that would tell a story about their daily lives, and to achieve this, he assigned his photographers various themes. In later years the photography project was expanded to include depictions of life all over the United States. In 1942 Stryker's unit was transferred to the Office of War Information, at which point the photographers focused on mobilization during



World War II. FSA photos were used by newspapers, as in the *New York Times* article by Lee E. Cooper, entitled *FSA Winding Up Its Homestead Program; Built 11,800 Farm Dwellings as 'Models.'* In the article there is an insert of six FSA photos, including a photo of a typical home at Wabash Farms in Indiana. The caption over the photo says "The FSA Hopes These Small Homes Will Be Models for Future Rural Construction."

Stryker sought photographs that "related people to the land and vice versa" because those photographs helped the idea that poverty could be changed through reform. One method was to send photographers to shoot before and after stories about resettlement and other projects to show the need for action and the results of FSA programs. There were many aims, including to:

- Emphasize the importance of agriculture to the overall economy
- Promote the benefits of FSA programs and ensure continued funding from Congress
- Explain to Congress and the public its programs and what it was trying to accomplish
- Create sympathy with the public and government officials for sharecroppers, tenant farmers and migrants
- Distribute photos that are different than those taken by commercial and industrial photographers

Photographers in the Historical Section were sent out on assignments throughout the entire country and Puerto Rico. Stryker was very good at getting the best out of his photographers. Before going out on assignments every photographer was supposed to learn as much as possible about the geographical area they were going to. They were encouraged to consult J. Russell Smith's socioeconomic text, *North America: Its People and the Resources, Development, and Prospects of the Continent as the Home of Man*, as well as maps, government pamphlets and magazines, such as *Look*, *Life*, *Harper's* and *Atlantic*.

Stryker did not tell his photographers how to shoot their photos, but he did give them lists of themes. He briefed them on their assignments before being sent out, giving them detailed instructions, or so called "shooting scripts." He also wrote letters, memos and notes as well, such as one, dated January 14, 1936, to Dorothea Lange:

As you are driving along through the agricultural area and if you can do it without too much extra effort, would you take a few shots of various types of farm activities such as your picture showing the lettuce workers? I think Dr. Tugwell would be very appreciative of photographs of this sort to be used as illustrative material for some things which the Department of Agriculture is working on. I would not want you to take too much time to do this, but of the various types of agricultural activity in the area I think it would be very much worthwhile.

Lange took eleven photos in Clayton in Hendricks County, Indiana, very near US 40, the old national road, in July 1936. The summer heat was intense and she was worried about the quality

of the negatives, but they turned out wonderfully. Her photos of threshing convey the nature of this hard and dirty work. She became interested in the mechanization of agriculture and thought perhaps that threshing crews were a rare and disappearing sight on the American landscape.

Assignments usually took photographers on lengthy trips to several states at a time. In July of 1936, Dorothea Lange was possibly in twelve others states besides Indiana, as well as the District of Columbia. Some of the FSA photographers were travelling through Indiana on their assignments. For example, when Arthur Rothstein photographed Parke and Vermillion Counties, he most likely entered Indiana in February, 1940 on highway US 52 from Ohio at West Harrison, Indiana and left the state most likely on highway US 36 near Dana, Indiana on his way to Illinois.

Stryker was not the only one to give scripts or outlines to photographers. Other administrators in the Information Division as well as regional and district administrators gave ideas as well. Often the photographers were accompanied on their assignments by regional or district officials, who also provided suggestions and took their own photos for the local FSA offices.

## **Criticisms of the FSA**

The FSA was never sure of its aim, whether it was to hasten modernization and efficiency of farming or increase the number of small land owners who could stay on the land. The agenda of the FSA was complex and sometimes contradictory, attempting to combine old agrarian ideals with a new faith in the ideas of experts and governmental policies.

Throughout the 1930s, one half of all seats in the U. S. House of Representatives and nearly all U. S. Senate seats represented districts or states with substantial farm populations. But most rural representatives in Congress were concerned with large farm owners and not tenants, small farmers and sharecroppers. They latter looked to the Executive Branch for help. The rural poor did not constitute a true power base or constituency, and there were no lobbyists for the rural poor.

Administrative and construction costs were high. The FSA communities often had serious cost overruns. This was a major criticism, as the per unit housing cost often exceed those in the private sector.

Because of the extraordinary rapid growth of the FSA, administrators had a hard time keeping track of their divisions and field supervisors lacked a sense of direction. FSA county supervisors were also second-class government bureaucrats, denied civil service status and paid less than their counterparts in the Agricultural Adjustment Administration or Soil Conservation Service.

There was overlapping and competing federal government agencies that were supposed to work with the farm sector, including the Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Soil Conservation Service, Farm Credit Administration, Rural Electrification Administration, Agricultural Adjustment Administration, Tennessee Valley Authority, Civilian Conservation Corps, Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Reclamation, Works Progress Administration and Public Works Administration. They competed for money and power.

There were rivalries and infighting with Congress, federal agencies, land grant colleges, extension officials, local realtors and elites and various farm organizations. There were personality conflicts, intrusive bureaucrats and domineering planners.

Some farm organizations, including the Farm Bureau, Missouri Farmers Association, Farmers Union, Farm Holiday Movement, Farmers Independence Council, National Farmers Alliance, Corn Belt Liberty League and Farmers Guild often opposed the work of the FSA.

Tenant farmers, with yearly contracts, tended not to worry about soil erosion, crop rotation, fertilizers or soil building crops. The increased productivity per farmer and per acre more than made up for the planned removal of land from use. Most farmers applied to the FSA for easy credit. They did not always heed the advice to make changes to their farm management.

There was considerable redbaiting, calling the work of the FSA collectivization, socialism, communism or utopian. In 1936 the Republican National Committee said that "President Roosevelt's Resettlement Administration is establishing communal farms which follow the Russian pattern" and that they were communistic in conception. Rexford Tugwell had travelled to the Soviet Union in 1927 with a delegation of trade unionists and academics. He was interested in the planning of Soviet agriculture and was impressed with the magnitude of their efforts, but not with their tactics. He wrote a chapter on Russian agriculture for the report *Soviet Russia in the Second Decade: A Joint Survey by the Technical Staff of the First American Trade Union Delegation*. Because of his background and ideas, Tugwell was called "Rex the Dreamer", "Rex the Red" and "Lenin of the New Deal." Needless to say, he was a lightning rod for criticism for the Resettlement Administration.

A 1942 Department of Agriculture study of subsistence homesteads concluded that clients did not really want to live simple pastoral lives or become pioneering homesteaders. What they wanted was more income and consumer goods. The report went on to say that "Good housing with earth to dig in, a chance to garden, elbow room, a wholesome and beautiful place in which to rear children - such things are good and widely desired. But they do not substitute for an adequate cash income and security of employment." Malcolm Crowley, in a 1933 *New Republic* article, made fun of the back to the land movement as wistful and primitive Arcadian simplicity. He argued that any effort to transform people back into "peasants of the thirteen century" would

be dissolved by the irresistible forces of modernity: “money, automobiles, radios and Greta Garbo.”

In December 1942 parts of the Farm Security Administration were combined with other agencies to form the Food Production Administration, which became the War Food Administration in 1943. President Roosevelt moved the FSA housing programs to the National Housing Agency in late 1942, which was replaced by the Farmers Home Administration in 1946. The Historical Section of the FSA, where the photographic project was housed, was transferred to the Office of War Information, an agency created to consolidate government information services. The Office of War Information included two photographic sections, both of which photographed the mobilization effort during the early years of World War II. One of the sections was headed by Roy Stryker. The other, the News Bureau, had begun in the Office of Emergency Management in 1941 and was merged with Stryker’s section in 1943. The Office of War Information operated till September 1945. Although the Farm Security Administration photographs were being filed for future use, there was a danger that critics of the agency would have them destroyed. In order to find a safe home for the photographs, Stryker transferred the photographic collection to the Library of Congress, after getting approval from President Roosevelt.

## **The Indiana FSA Photographers**

Nine FSA photographers took photos in Indiana. Arthur Rothstein made two trips to Indiana, in 1938 and 1940. John Vachon made two trips, in 1940 and 1941. Jack Delano made two trips, in 1942 and 1943. The other six photographers made only a single trip to Indiana.

Jack Delano was with the FSA from 1940 to 1942. In 1939 he received a grant from the Federal Arts Program. He produced a series of photographs about mining conditions in Pottsville, in the Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania coal area, where illegal workers were employed. Subsequently, he sent some photographs to Roy Stryker at the FSA. He applied for a position, but none were available. Stryker did hire him in 1940 to replace Arthur Rothstein, who was leaving. His first assignment was to photograph workers and small towns along the eastern seaboard, from Maine to Florida. He travelled to Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands in 1941 for the FSA. Puerto Rico affected him so deeply that he and his family settled there in 1946. He returned to the mainland in 1942 and photographed the railroads for the Office of War Information. He pictured how the railroad industry operated and the people who did the work. He worked in Chicago and then the Pacific Coast, and started using color. The two Indiana series he shot were done under the auspices of the Office of War Information.

Esther Bubley was with the FSA from 1942 to 1943. In the fall of 1942, Roy Stryker hired her as a darkroom assistant at the Office of War Information, where his photographic unit had recently been transferred from the Farm Security Administration. With the encouragement of Stryker and

some of the other FSA photographers, she started taking pictures for the Office of War Information, documenting life on the home front during World War II. In late 1943, she followed Stryker, who left the Office of War Information to work on a photographic project for Standard Oil of New Jersey. Reprising of her earlier Office of War Information Greyhound bus story, she did a bus story series for Standard Oil of New Jersey, earning her the award for Best Picture Sequence in the Encyclopedia Britannica/University of Missouri School of Journalism "News Pictures of the Year" in 1948.

Dorothea Lange was with the FSA from 1935 to 1939. As the Great Depression progressed and her portrait business declined, she turned her camera to unemployed people. These photographs led to her employment with the FSA. In 1935 she married economist Paul Schuster Taylor, professor of economics at the University of California, Berkeley. Together they documented rural poverty and migrant laborers. Lange took the photos, and Taylor did the interviewing and collected data. Because FSA photos were distributed free to news publications and magazines, many of her photos became icons of the Great Depression. Lange's most famous photo is undoubtedly "Migrant Mother."

Russell Lee was with the FSA from 1936 to 1942. Lee took the most photos in Indiana. He was a true Midwesterner. He grew up in a small town in rural Illinois. His family was engaged in business and owned farmland near Ottawa, Illinois. He attended Culver Military Academy in Indiana and graduated in 1921. He joined the FSA in 1936 and worked all over the United States. In the fall of 1936 he was traveling alone through the Midwest. For months he lived in hotels and boarding houses in small towns. He went to Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota and parts of Michigan. He was best known for his photographic work in San Augustine, Texas and Pie Town, New Mexico.

Arthur Rothstein was with the FSA from 1935 to 1940. Rothstein was an unlikely FSA photographer, as he was the youngest. He was also middle-class, urban and did not have much professional experience. He developed an interest in photography while at Columbia University, where he met Stryker who was an instructor. As a senior at Columbia University in 1935, he helped to create a visual record of American agriculture that Stryker was assembling for a National Youth Project. Before the year was out, Stryker had hired the twenty year old at the newly created Resettlement Administration to establish the photographic laboratory and darkroom. Rothstein was one of the FSA's most productive photographers. His first assignment was to photograph Virginia farmers who were being relocated to make way for the Shenandoah National Park. In 1936 he went to Cimarron County, Oklahoma to cover the Dust Bowl. He took a photograph that was captioned "Fleeing a Dust Storm, "showing a man and his two sons walking into the face of a dust storm." It became another iconic FSA photo. Rothstein left the Farm Security Administration in 1940 to join the staff of *Look* magazine.

Carl Mydans was with the FSA for almost a year and a half from 1935 to 1936. His time at the FSA was brief, only 16 months. He was the fifth photographer to join the group, starting at a salary of \$35 dollars a week. Mydans became interested in photography while an undergraduate student at the Boston University School of Journalism. His first reporting jobs were for *The Boston Globe* and the *Boston Herald*. After graduating from Boston University in 1930, he went to New York as a writer for the *American Banker*. He travelled throughout New England and the South for the FSA. He gained recognition for his photographs of Arkansas farmers and their families. In 1936 he joined *Life* as one of its earliest staff photographers.

John Vachon was with the FSA from 1936 to 1943. While enrolled in graduate school at Catholic University he was looking for a job in Washington, D. C., when he heard of a possible opportunity with the Resettlement Administration. He interviewed with Stryker, who told him the job was temporary and consisted of the “rather dull work” of copying photo captions onto the back of prints done by the Historical Section’s photographers. He started as a trainee and clerk in charge of the photographic file. He began studying the images of the FSA photographers as he worked and in 1937, with assistance from Stryker and encouragement from other FSA photographers, he began taking his own pictures around the Potomac River area using a borrowed Leica camera. In 1938, Stryker gave him his first solo assignment in Nebraska. Vachon continued to take on assignments and to classify the FSA photographic file until 1941. Vachon continued working with the FSA until it was disbanded. After he finished his military service in World War II he worked with Stryker at Standard Oil of New Jersey.

Theodor Jung was hired in 1934 by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration to draft statistical maps, pictorial graphs and charts of unemployment statistics. In 1935 he began work in an educational unit of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration doing visual graphics and designing pamphlets. He showed Stryker some of his photographic work and was hired to be an FSA photographer and a graphic designer for publications and exhibits in September 1935. Stryker had high hopes for him. Supposedly Jung had an instinct for good photos, but his technical grasp of cameras was lacking. Stryker was disappointed with his output, especially his April 1936 Midwest trip to Ohio. Within two months he was transferred to another division in the Resettlement Administration, the Special Skills Division. His Indiana pictures include photos of poor roads, erosion, and inadequate living quarters.

Paul Carter joined the staff of the Historical Section in late 1935. His brother, John Franklin Carter, was the Head of the Information Division and Roy Stryker’s supervisor in the Resettlement Administration. He visited Michigan in May 1936, cut across Indiana and was in Minnesota in July, covering two early New Deal projects there, the Beltrami Island Settler Relocation Project and Austin Acres, a project to provide suburban housing for workers in a town where the Hormel meat packing plant was the major industry. He also took photographs in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Maine, New York, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania and Iowa. He was in ill health and lacked the energy for trips. This demonstrates just how physically



grueling it must have been for the FSA photographers on the road. Stryker convinced him that the life of an FSA photographer was not for him. Stryker also believed he did not have the eye for compelling photos. He left the FSA to open a camera store near Dartmouth College in New Hampshire in 1936.

Nine photos taken in Indiana are not attributed to any photographer. They are all taken in Decatur in September 1935. Four photos are of the Railroad station and the rest are of Decatur Homesteads. They might have been taken by a photographer assigned to photograph Decatur Homesteads or simply a FSA photographer traveling through Indiana, either by car or train, on another assignment. One of the requirements of photographers was that they own a car. But it is also possible that they traveled by railroad. Decatur was on the Erie Railroad line from New York to Chicago. One of those photos lists Rothstein, Mydans or Carter as the possible photographer. But the photos may have been taken by Ben Shahn on his trip to the Midwest and South in 1935. He took photos of Dyess Colony, a Federal Emergency Relief Administration and Works Progress Administration community in Mississippi County, Arkansas during that time period. He also travelled to Kentucky and Tennessee. Or perhaps it was Theodor Jung entering the state on his way to Brown County on an assignment. Or they could have been taken by Carl Mydans, as he was in Cincinnati in September of 1935.

## **The Indiana FSA Photographs**

There are 678 Indiana photographs with captions in the Library of Congress' FSA – OWI Collection. There are others that do not have captions, the "killed" or "untitled" ones. Generally the FSA photographers mailed their exposed negatives to the Historical Section's photographic lab in Washington, D. C. for developing, numbering and printing. In the beginning years Stryker was almost solely responsible for reviewing contact prints made from the negatives and selecting images that he considered suitable for printing. Over time, the FSA photographers had greater responsibility in image selection. Rejected images were referred to as "killed." In earlier years, a hole was sometimes punched through the "killed" negatives. This practice was discontinued. Later, near duplicate photos without captions were referred to as "untitled." The rejected images are almost always near duplicates or alternate views of a printed negative. After Stryker reviewed and selected images, the negatives and contact prints were returned to the FSA photographers in the field for captioning. The resulting captions were edited at the Historical Section's headquarters. The selected images were then printed and mounted. Captions were applied to the photo mounts, and the photographs were filed in the photographic file. They maintained files of negatives, prints and captions.

All the Indiana photos are black and white. While there were FSA color photos, there are no color photographs taken in Indiana. There are photos from 24 out of 92 Indiana counties, a quarter of all Indiana counties. There are nine photos with no location given. They were taken by

Esther Bubley during her Greyhound bus trip through Indiana. The Indiana photos were taken between 1935 and 1943, except for 1939, when no photos were taken. That is probably a reflection of the Historical Section's budget and priorities. Almost two-thirds were taken in 1937, 1938, and 1940 focusing on the Ohio River flood, tenant farmers, homesteads and the U.S. Army Chaplain School at Fort Benjamin Harrison.

Most of the Indiana photos are primarily concerned with rural and traditional agricultural life. There are no photos of the major industries, including iron, coal, limestone, glass, steel and automotive. There are some photographs of signs, but not as many as in other states. Signs abound in the overall FSA photographic collection, including amateur commercial signs and hand painted ones. The photos of signs are now part of cultural heritage of the Great Depression. Stryker told the FSA photographers to "Show the city people what it is like to live on the farm." And in the case of Indiana that is what they did. Most of Stryker's photographers came from the urban centers of the east and west coasts. For them the American heartland was terra incognita. Jack Delano said "I had always been a city boy." Stuart Kidd said, "It [rural America] was the neglected backyard of an American Dream that has transferred to the dynamic cities." Carl Mydans said "I lived in an isolated world." So traveling to the heartland was an educational experience for them.

There are photos of crops: oats, soybeans, sorghum, wheat, cantaloupes and corn. There are photos of livestock: chickens, cows, hogs, sheep and horses. The photographers liked to photograph small towns including main streets, courthouse squares, parks, schools, post offices, churches, hotels, stores, cafes, barbershops and gas stations. The lasting impression they left is of the small town as a friendly and social public space. The small town became a powerful cultural symbol for a society longing to be reassured about the soundness of its origins, the simplicity of an earlier age and nostalgia for the rural past. One can also think of the images put forth by Frank Capra, Thomas Hart Benton and Thornton Wilder, all projecting images of the nostalgic small town America. There are some beautiful photographs of small town life in Indiana. There are no photos in Indiana of drought, dust storms, migrants or migrant camps. The FSA constructed 95 migrant camps. The closest migrant camps to Indiana were in Michigan, Missouri and Arkansas.

## **City and Town**

City assignments generally were very specific. There were more photos of cities after July 1942 when the FSA photographic unit, the Historical Section, was transferred to the Office of War Information. Photos of cities increased as the aim shifted to showing a country ready for war. By then many photos portrayed the city as a symbol of hope and renewal for the future. The only city in Indiana photographed was Indianapolis. Indianapolis in 1930 had a population of 365,000 and was the only genuine metropolitan center. The other four major Indiana cities with about 100,000 each were Fort Wayne, Gary, South Bend and Evansville. The rest of the state was



much more rural, dotted with smaller cities and towns. Although the rural part of the state was by then a minority, it still dominated the character of the state in the 1930s.

There are several photos of downtown Indianapolis, showing the Woolworth store on Washington Street near Meridian Street and people around Monument Circle. But they do not show the Soldiers' and Sailors' Monument in any photos. They were taken by Vachon in January 1942. The Indianapolis city shots show crowded, anonymous life in contrast to the friendly small town scenes. There are two photos taken also in January by him in Brazil, Indiana on US 40. Perhaps he was passing through the state, maybe on a bus, to a larger assignment in Missouri and then the Dakotas. Just the previous month, December 1941, he took numerous photos of the Greyhound Bus Station in Washington, D. C., which is why he perhaps was on a bus trip. Those are the only photos he took in Indiana that year.

There are many photos by Esther Bubley in the Greyhound Bus Station in Indianapolis taken in 1943. The photos show people boarding buses and in the waiting rooms. Waiting is a theme in many FSA photos in general. Waiting was part of the fabric of life during the Great Depression. It could also symbolize the lack of hope or opportunity and the frustration of everyday life.

There is one photo of the Indianapolis 500 and four of the crowds at the race by Rothstein in 1938. It was the return of single seat racers. The 1938 race was won by Floyd Roberts with a record setting time of 117.2 miles per hour. He was killed the following year while attempting to defend his title. In one photo is car number 14, Russ Snowberger's, and car number 26, Frank Brisko's. Snowberger had qualified with the second fastest speed of 120 miles per hour. He finished 25th as a broken rod ended his race on lap 56. Brisk started in 11th position and went out of the race on lap 39 and finished 31st. As it was Memorial Day, and a holiday weekend, perhaps Rothstein decided to go to the Indianapolis Motor Speedway and take a few photos of the famous race. Generally there are very few FSA photos of big events, celebrities or places. There are very few FSA photos of President Roosevelt prior to World War II. For example, there are no photos of the Stock Exchange on Wall Street.

The only other urban area for which there are photos is Vincennes, taken by Rothstein and Vachon. But Vincennes probably had more of the feel of a small town and not a city. The country as a whole and Indiana became an urban society in 1920, with 50.6% of Indiana classified as urban. By 1930 Indiana was 55.5% urban. The population of Vincennes in 1930 was only 17,000. The 1930 census classified places with 2,500 people as urban. This may seem strange to us today, but it indicated a state gradually becoming more urban.

In early 1936 Stryker sought out Robert Lynd, the author of *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture*, a socioeconomic study of a small American town. The town was Muncie, Indiana. On the train back to Washington, D. C., after meeting with Lynd, Stryker wrote up a draft of a shooting script on small towns that was to become a permanent directive for

all FSA photographers in the field. It is too bad that Stryker never sent any FSA photographers to Muncie, as it would have been wonderful to compare the book with FSA photos.

## **Erosion of the Land**

There are several photos depicting erosion, mostly in Brown and Martin Counties. Stryker sought to build a photographic file on erosion from the outset. He did not want to rely on photos from the Soil Conservation Service, Forest Service, or other federal agencies. As late as May 1941, almost six years after the photographic project started, Stryker still regarded the erosion collection as incomplete. He wrote to Frank Delano that “we are a little short of that type of erosion picture where the house and human are included.” Brown County was known for making railroad ties. Nationally, the FSA photographers shot the lumber industry and sawmills extensively. They were the most photographed industries in the South. It was probably because of their rural and quaint rustic character.

## **River Floods**

There are many photos of the 1937 Ohio River flood, which broke all previous flood records in the lower Ohio Valley. At one point the river’s entire length, 981 miles, stood above flood level and covered 15,000 miles of highway. Indiana was hit very hard. On the Indiana side of the Ohio, ninety-five percent of Jeffersonville, Clarksville and Utica were under water. At Evansville the flood crested at 53 feet on the last day of January and did not recede to flood stage level until 40 days later. From Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to Cairo, Illinois, one million were left homeless and 385 dead. Property losses totaled \$500 million. At some points in southern Indiana, the Ohio stretched twenty miles across. The river stood almost twenty five feet deep in downtown Jeffersonville. Four thousand Works Progress Administration workers were sent to Evansville and one thousand to Jeffersonville to help battle the flood. The town of Leavenworth, Indiana, with a population of 400, was completely destroyed. Works Progress Administration workers relocated Leavenworth after the flood. Over 100,000 were left homeless in Indiana. The Red Cross opened more than 1,500 refugee camps and 300 field hospitals. The Resettlement Administration cared for thousands of unfortunate farm animals during the flood and afterwards repaired damaged croplands and distributed thousands of seed packets.

Stryker wanted to get the human side of the story and the effects of the flood upon the land. He was more interested in the aftermath of the flood and its environmental impact. Although he used Walker Evans, Ed Locke and Russell Lee to cover the flood, he was reluctant to commit too many resources, as the press and media would provide extensive coverage. The flood was widely reported in newspapers, movie newsreels and on radio. Evans and Locke spent their time along the levees in Arkansas. Lee was assigned the Ohio Valley. Russell Lee was visiting relatives in

northern Illinois and headed to Posey County at the confluence of the Wabash and Ohio rivers. His assignment was to wait till the floodwaters receded and record the effects. The flood story was only Lee's second assignment. Stryker urged Lee to concentrate on the devastation to farm buildings, houses and the land. Stryker said that "The newspaper is all subject and action. Ours shows what's back of the action." Lee also took photos of the flood in Illinois and Missouri.

The Works Progress Administration, which provided disaster relief, made a documentary, entitled *Man Against the River*, about the flood of 1937 in Indiana, Ohio, and Kentucky. The FSA documentary film, *The River* by Pare Lorentz, used actual footage from the 1937 flood as well. Lorentz was planning on using stock footage of flooding, but Hollywood was not obliging. *The River* was a film celebrating the Tennessee Valley Authority. The Tennessee Valley Authority mitigated flooding, put a stop to the spoiling of forests and provided hydroelectric power to a vast area. This documentary film shows the importance of the Mississippi River. It details the history of the flood prone Mississippi basin and how farming and timber practices had caused topsoil to be swept down the river and into the Gulf of Mexico. The film covers the efforts to control floods and conserve soil. The documentary shows the way in which the Mississippi River is misused. At the same time it is also a paean to the American natural landscape. Lorentz combined stunning visuals, a magnificent score and moving narration to show the necessity of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Supposedly the documentary was inspired in part by a map of the United States, with the Mississippi River running down the middle of the country, which hung in the Secretary of Agriculture's office. The documentary was filmed in fourteen states. It was budgeted at \$50,000 and Lorentz brought it in under budget. The visual beauty of Lorentz's images is complemented by his script. The script, essentially free verse, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in poetry in 1938. Lorentz had been asked to do an article for *McCall's* about the condition of the Mississippi River. He thought the article might be the basis for his next documentary. When the article was done, he thought it too long, and spent a week writing the poem. Stylistically, he used a Walt Whitman inspired repetition of names in the poem. He sent both to *McCall's* allowing them to decide which they wanted. They published the poem in May 1937 and received 150,000 requests for copies by readers. He decided to use it for the script of *The River*. Many newspapers gave it glowing reviews, although some critics looked at it as government propaganda. The government made it available to theaters for no charge and it was picked up by Paramount Pictures. It was a critical and commercial success with both the public and even government agencies. It was nominated for an Academy Award and won the top prize in the best documentary category at the Venice Film Festival in 1938, beating Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympiad*.

There was major springtime flooding of rivers in the Midwest in 1943 as well. In addition to Indiana, the flooded states included Illinois, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, and Mississippi. The Red Cross estimated that 1,350,000 acres of land were inundated. High water on highways and railroads meant shipping had to be delayed. Logansport, Indiana, which

had five industrial plants with war contracts, all had to be shut down. The Red Cross estimated that 30,000 families, 100,000 people were homeless in shelters and 9,663 homes were destroyed or damaged. President Roosevelt released seven and half million dollars for the states to match for rebuilding highways and bridges. The FSA set aside \$235,000 for immediate needs and instructed county supervisors to make small loans, usually \$30 or less, to distressed farm families. Generally the average FSA grant was \$20 for emergency reasons. More than a quarter of a million dollars was available for loans to put in new crops. There are two photos of the 1943 flood of the Arkansas River near Fort Smith taken by the U. S. Army Signal Corps in May in the FSA – OWI Collection at the Library of Congress.

## Tenant Farmers

In February 1937 Stryker asked his photographers “to make a big drive on tenancy pictures.” This was due to the publication of *The Report of the President’s Committee on Farm Tenancy* and the imminent consideration of the Bankhead-Jones Farm Tenant bill. The report established that tenancy had increased from 25% in 1880 to 42% of all farmers in 1935. Stryker urged Russell Lee to get as many photos of tenant farmers as possible. Less than 25% of the farms in the sixteen southwest Indiana counties were farmed by tenants. The highest concentration of non-owner operated farms was in the northeast Indiana counties of Benton, Newton and White. More than half the farms in those three counties were operated by farm laborers and tenants. One major absentee investor owned 74,000 acres in Benton County. By 1941 the Indiana Defense Relocation Corporation purchased 10,000 acres, mostly in Benton County to resettle hundreds of farm families displaced from La Porte, Charleston and Madison by munitions plants and ordnance proving grounds. The FSA was to provide loans and grants where necessary. In FSA Region Three they estimated that 2,500 families would be displaced in Indiana, Illinois, Ohio, Iowa and Missouri.

By 1937 the in-depth picture story was the preferred working method for the Information Division and Historical Section. It was intended to expedite the FSA’s service to the press and media as well as legitimize their work. In a letter to Russell Lee in January 1937 Stryker listed various newspapers and news agencies that were interested in stories. Stryker wrote “They would like a story which could be labeled “The Tenant’s Day” or “A Day in a Tenant’s Life.” Subsequently he instructed Lee to concentrate on selected families and photograph them in depth. Stryker also wrote Arthur Rothstein that Beverly Smith was writing an article on tenancy at Gee’s Bend, Alabama for an issue of *The American Magazine*. The FSA had made loans and provided farm and home advice and instruction at Gee’s Bend. Stryker thought perhaps a major magazine would be interested in using FSA photographs for a major story. He told Rothstein, “We could do a swell story; one that *Life* will grab.” *Life* did not do a story about Gee’s Bend, but an article entitled “The Big World At Last Reaches Gee’s Bend,” by John Temple Graves ran in the *New York Times Magazine* on August 22, 1937 using ten photos by Rothstein.

Undoubtedly some of the Indiana photos taken by FSA photographers were probably meant to be used along with a newspaper or magazine story if possible. There are over thirty photos of Tip Estes and his family in Benton County, showing them doing chores and relaxing. There are over a dozen photos of Frank and Mrs. Sheroan in Tippecanoe County at the auction of their possessions. Most auctions took place in late winter. Auctions reached their peak in February, as sellers anticipated the property tax assessment due in March. In addition to those two families, there are over forty photos of six other tenant farmer families in Indiana. It is very possible that some of these sets of photos were used by local newspapers in Indiana.

## **Wartime Stories**

During the War World II years, the stories changed from those about the lives of farmers to stories related to the war effort. There are nearly a hundred photos of the U. S. Army Chaplain School at Fort Benjamin Harrison by Frank Delano. His photos show clergymen preparing physically and spiritually. The photos are of the first four classes, including topography, first aid, military law and defense against chemical warfare. In 1942 the U. S. Army Chaplain School was moved to Harvard University. The photos taken at the U. S. Army Chaplain School by Delano reflect the unity of the war effort with interdenominational and interracial settings.

There are over thirty photos of the Indiana Harbor Belt Railroad by Frank Delano. It was 1943, and gas was rationed because of World War II and public transportation was being encouraged. Delano spent a typical twelve-hour workday on the trains as they were switched from yard to yard. He slept overnight at the Gibson YMCA. One of the photos Delano took shows snow on the ground, the only Indiana photo to truly convey a winter scene.

There are over forty photos of Esther Buble's Greyhound bus trip through Indiana in 1943. Buble travelled across Indiana from Chicago to Cincinnati by bus. It was a four-month cross-country bus trip from the District of Columbia to as far north as Chicago and as far south as Memphis. The goal was to document bus travel, which had dramatically increased with the rationing of gasoline and tires. Her trip was under the auspices of the Office of War Information.

## **New Deal Communities**

Overall the Government planned and started 99 communities, with almost 11,000 housing units costing an average of \$9,691. There is a disagreement about the number of communities. Depending on how they are counted there are perhaps as many as 200 communities that reached some level of development. They have been called a "forgotten legacy of the New Deal." There were several different types of communities and subsistence homesteads, including:

Garden cities

Stranded communities  
Farm communities  
Industrial communities  
Farm villages  
Cooperative farms  
Farm and rural industrial  
Industrial communities  
Forest homesteads

There were two communities in Ohio:

Dayton Homesteads in Montgomery County  
Greenhills in Hamilton County

There were two communities in Kentucky:

Sublimity Farms in Laurel County  
Christian-Trigg Farms in Christian County

There were two communities in Michigan:

Ironwood Homesteads in Gogebic County  
Saginaw Valley Farms in Saginaw County

There was one community in Illinois:

Lake County Homesteads in Chicago

Most communities were in the South and Northeast and not the Midwest. Overall, the Division of Subsistence Homesteads planned 34 communities. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration planned 28 communities. The Resettlement Administration planned 37 communities. There were a few communities planned for Indians but they were transferred to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs.

The first communities were started by the Division of Subsistence Homesteads in the Department of Interior. The Division of Subsistence Homesteads was created through Section 208, Title II of the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933. The communities were meant to demonstrate a new direction toward a healthier and more economically secure future. Subsistence homesteads were to be a new balance between industry and agriculture absorbing the industrial unemployed and displaced farmers.



There was concern and debate about the term subsistence homesteads. Other possible terminology suggested included back to the land, part time farming, subsistence farmlets, part time gardens, rural homesteads, semirural living and farmsteads. President Roosevelt did not like the term subsistence because he thought it gave a misleading impression of what he hoped they would accomplish. Subsistence seemed to imply scraping by or doing just enough to get by. But the word subsistence was intended to reassure the farm lobbies that the new communities would not produce goods for the commercial market. The word homestead was clearly intended to echo the great American experience of settling the public land of the West. Milburn L. Wilson, Director of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, hoped that the subsistence homesteads would demonstrate the feasibility of thoughtfully designed and constructed homes at reasonable prices. He also hoped they would build community spirit to ensure a well-rounded community life.

There was a revival of handicrafts started by the Division of Subsistence Homesteads, including woodworking, weaving and metalworking. The Resettlement Administration's Special Skills Division had experts that travelled around teaching those skills. For each community the Special Skills Division set up simple furniture at demonstration houses. It advised the architects and engineers on house designs, flagpoles, and playgrounds. It planned curtains, rugs and upholstery for the homes. Painters provided murals for community buildings. Community buildings were used for dances, movies, plays, lectures and recreation. The Special Skills Division also provided teachers in the areas of fine arts and applied arts, painting, sculpture, music, dramatics, furniture design and landscaping.

The Federal Emergency Relief Administration also planned and initiated communities. One community started by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration was Skyline Farms in Alabama. It was started in 1934. It was originally called Cumberland Farms Project. It was for whites only. It included a school, commissary, warehouse and manager's office. It had 181 farm units varying in size from 40 to 60 acres. Residents were part of a cooperative and together owned a store, a cooperative marketing association, a prepaid health care program and a prepaid veterinary association. There was a Skyline Farms Band, which performed for President and Eleanor Roosevelt at the White House in 1938. Musicologist Alan Lomax later recorded the Band for the Archive of Folk Song at the Library of Congress. It is perhaps the first time a traditional music ensemble performed at the White House. In 1944 the federal government began to liquidate the community's assets, selling to private buyers. Only two of the original families were able to buy their farms.

The Resettlement Administration planned and initiated thirty-seven communities, including three greenbelt towns. They originally planned to build twenty-five greenbelt communities, but only started three "Tugwell Towns", as they well called. They were

Greendale, Wisconsin (outside Milwaukee, Wisconsin)

Greenhills, Ohio (outside Cincinnati, Ohio)  
 Greenbelt, Maryland (outside Washington, D.C.)

Frank Lloyd Wright offered to help Tugwell design and build a greenbelt town, but he reportedly asked for an astronomical figure of \$ 100,000,000. He said he would build Broadacre City, the finest city in the world. All three of the greenbelt towns were to be built for approximately \$31,000,000.

The aim was to disperse the working population out of overcrowded cities into planned new towns involved in community decision-making. The goal was to provide work, low rent housing and introduce planned garden city principles.

Greenbelt towns were incorporated with city managers, either appointed or elected by the city council. They did encounter opposition, as local realtors feared lower land values and local governments feared lower tax revenues. They were opposed by organizations such as the National Association of Home Builders, the Savings and Loan League and the Mortgage Bankers Association.

The three greenbelt towns were only three out of 99 New Deal communities but they absorbed over one third of the cost and accounted for one fourth of the total settlers of the entire community program. Ultimately, all 99 communities came under the jurisdiction of the FSA.

The greenbelt towns influenced town planning around the world, being only second to the Tennessee Valley Authority in interest to foreign guests. The U. S. Department of State received requests for information from several foreign governments about greenbelt towns.

### ***Photographing Indiana Communities***

The FSA photographers preferred to be assigned to problem areas and not the new communities, which they considered routine work. They felt that the new community projects offered the photographers few creative avenues for their work. The new communities were barely established, under construction and often in denuded landscapes. Irene Delano, who often traveled with her husband Frank, referring to communities, said “There’s got to be a limit as to how many ways you can photograph it.” When photographing the communities, Ben Shahn said he found “neat little rows of houses” that were “impossible to photograph.” Marion Post Wolcott complained about photographing communities. She said “I am sorry I squawked about projects, it seemed that I just couldn’t face the sight of another coop jackass or pressure cooker.” But she eventually photographed twenty communities. Neither Ben Shahn nor Marion Post Wolcott took any photos in Indiana. After 1937, photographing the communities became more intensified. During the next five years the FSA photographers made 37 working visits to communities. There were three communities in Indiana that were photographed by FSA photographers. Decatur Homesteads was a FSA planned industrial community. Wabash Farms was a resettlement project



with FSA funding and expertise. Deshee Farms was a cooperative farm, with land leased and managed by the FSA.

### ***Decatur Homesteads***

There was only one homestead in Indiana, Decatur Homesteads. An Afro-American homestead was suggested for Indianapolis but never got off the ground. U. S. House Representative Louis Ludlow protested after getting complaints from various sources. Decatur Homesteads was authorized in December 1933, following the first subsistence homestead, Arthurdale, which had a unit cost of \$16,635, the highest of all 99 communities. The population of Decatur in 1930 was 5,156 and only 5,861 in 1940. Decatur Homesteads, which was listed as an industrial community, had 48 units of five-room homes, each with an average of 1.3 acres of land. It was developed with assistance of Purdue University and residents were promised work in the local General Electric plant. General Electric was doing a highly profitable business in New Deal contracts and the manufacture of electrical appliances purchased by rural consumers financed by New Deal funds. General Electric had a contract to manufacture electrical equipment to consumers of electricity produced by the Tennessee Valley Authority. President Roosevelt and his mother also owned 5,792 shares in General Electric. The city of Decatur furnished water lines and electrical hookup to the power plant. It was on an 80-acre site. Seven different styles of homes were built. Each unit faced a fifteen-acre park. The aim was for occupants that were selected to establish their own gardens. By 1935 all 48 houses were completed and occupied. A 1941 survey of resettlement communities found that the average size of a family was 5.2. The average age of the husband was 37.3 years and average age of the wife 33.3 years. The average education of the husband was 7.2 grades and the average education of his wife was 8.1 grades.

The residents paid \$19 a month to the Homestead Association Corporation to purchase their homes. The unit housing cost at Decatur was \$3,277. Of the 99 communities only ten had a lower unit housing cost. The corporation was dissolved in 1947. Homesteaders in the Decatur photos look happy, proud, and very content with their new homes. There are scenes of children skipping down the street or playing outside. There are photographs of families cheerfully working in their gardens. They are positive images intended to build support for the programs of the FSA. The photographs of the homesteads served to preserve forever the visual memory of what they looked like. Presently, the homes are now part of the Homestead Housing Addition on Homestead Drive, including Homestead Park. All the homes have been enlarged and remodeled.

### ***Wabash Farms***

In 1935 more than 21,000 rural Indiana families were on relief. The state of Indiana and the federal government pursued the conversion of unproductive land to conservation and recreation. The largest of these was the Hoosier National Forest, with almost 300,000 acres in nine counties. In the late 1930s, the Department of Agriculture proposed the White River Land Utilization

Project for a portion of Martin County characterized by submarginal farm land and low living standards. The Project provided for the purchase of 32,000 acres of land with the goal of restoring its forest productivity and creating a state park. Early in 1940, with the war already in progress, Congress passed the first supplemental National Defense Appropriations Act. Three million dollars was earmarked to build a Navy Ammunition Depot at Burns City, Indiana on the site of the White River Project. In 1943 the name was changed to Crane Naval Ammunition Depot. Some of the destitute and low income rural families who had been displaced by government purchases of submarginal land in Martin and Brown counties were resettled on individual and cooperative farms. There was a subsistence farm project on the outskirts of Loogootee, consisting of a barn and fifteen houses. Antipathy to government programs in Martin County ran high and it was dubbed "Hilterville" by many.

### ***Deshee Farms***

In late 1937 and early 1938 money was tight for Stryker. The Public Health Service discovered that FSA photographers did first rate work and began to use their services regularly. As the Public Health Service paid their bills on time and the Historical Section needed the money, Rothstein did work for the Public Health Service. But a trip for another agency could also be used to pay for an assignment for Stryker. That summer Rothstein travelled extensively in the Midwest at the expense of the Public Health Service. He did one project for them in Indianapolis. During that trip he took the five photos of the Indianapolis 500. He was able to go to Vincennes and photograph a FSA cooperative farm, Deshee Farms, in action.

General cooperative associations started with the Cooperative Marketing Act of 1926, but were greatly expanded by the Farm Credit Acts of 1933 and 1935. The FSA helped with 177 cooperative grain elevators in the Midwest. Throughout the country there were cooperatives for pastures, dairies, woodland, cattle breeding, canneries, hog breeding, poultry, feed grinding, orchards, filling stations, coal mines, seed houses, hatcheries, sawmills, freezing plants, tearooms, inns, blacksmiths' and cobblers' shops, garages, restaurants, rock quarries, gristmills and handicraft industries. There was a Division of Self-Help Cooperatives within the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration provided funds to help cooperatives turn to producing goods and services, including landscaping, butchering, plumbing, fishing, logging, carpentry, house repair and wrecking, dentistry, printing, baking, cider production, sewing, tailoring, pickling, rug and broom making, repairing shoes, radios and furniture, and operating cafeterias, beauty and barber shops. The goods and services could not be sold through normal market channels. Federal funds were given to cooperatives through the fall of 1935, with approximately 30,000 people participating during a two year period. In 1935 to 1936 there were 10,500 active cooperative associations. Minnesota led the nation with 1,401 followed by Wisconsin with 1,086 and Iowa with 954. Most of the 3.6 million members were in marketing cooperatives and farm supply cooperatives.

There were also medical cooperatives. In 1933 only 6% of the U.S. population had medical insurance. Medical assistance started with the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, which provided money to pay medical bills. According to the FSA, nearly half of all loan defaults were due to illness. The aim was to protect government loans by improving clients' rehabilitation potential. The medical cooperatives started in 1935. At its peak in 1942, the FSA had over 650,000 rural farmers enrolled in prepaid medical cooperative plans. There were almost 1,200 medical plans in 41 states, including 221 dental cooperatives

On January 25, 1938, fifteen men and one woman met in Vincennes to found Deshee Farms. It was a large cooperative farm ten miles south of Vincennes in Knox County. It was named Deshee Farms for a creek running through the area. It was a cooperative farm incorporated under the laws of Indiana. They negotiated with the Federal government to lease 2,771 acres of land in six scattered tracts, two large ones, seven miles apart with smaller farms in between. Deshee Farms included 42 houses, nine barns, three milking sheds and ten poultry houses. Forty one families could live in the cooperative at one time. It never reached full capacity. There were 38 in 1941 but was down to 28 a year later. Each house had running water and electricity but no indoor toilet. Each house also had a root cellar and garden plot. It was a diversified farm operation, including crops and livestock. It was a full scale farm with modern equipment. Residents were paid on an hourly basis. They received free rent from the cooperative and were eligible for a share of the profits or losses from the farm. The farm included a dairy herd, chickens and hogs. They also grew melons, tomatoes, wheat and corn.

The lease and loan agreements with the federal government provided both the land and capital. Under the terms of the agreement, the FSA had considerable control over management and operation of the farm, since a member of the FSA was to serve on the board of directors. The FSA hired and paid the farm manager and an accountant. The FSA also required the farm to submit a farm plan, with a line item budget, subject to approval to the FSA regional office in Indianapolis and the FSA headquarters in Washington, D. C. The agreement was to protect the government's investment by providing FSA training, supervision and education by farm specialists and home economists. The farm was managed by a board of directors with three year terms. The Deshee Farms community manager was the highest-ranking local FSA official. The board meetings also provided an opportunity for speakers, forums and movies. The farm sent a group of members each year to the Farm Institute at Purdue University. There were also correspondence courses members could take.

Membership turnover was significant. There were at least 86 different farm members over the course of seven years. Twenty-five percent stayed less than one year. Fourteen stayed between one and two years, 23 stayed between two and three years. Only two members stayed from the beginning to the end. Board members seldom served full terms and there was little continuity in the membership of committees. This may have contributed to the fact that a core of recognized leaders never really emerged. The FSA short-term objective of maximizing the use of resources

by providing access to more clients superseded the long-term goal of developing a stable membership and future success. Another problem was the ambiguous role of the FSA in the management structure. The structure of a farm manger, which was hired by the FSA, hindered the development of independent farm management. Cooperation became “going along” with the manger and not true cooperative work. The goal of instilling cooperative principles through educational and social programs faded over time. The scattered layout of the farms strained the members’ sense of community. Another rift was between members with either a background in hill-land or bottomland farming, who employed different farming techniques.

Resettlement communities in general were often unstable, poorly integrated, with high rates of turnover, factionalism, and mini revolts. It is no surprise that the cooperative spirit did not catch on. Residents rarely participated in civic meetings, such as literary courses, as they seemed dull. They did participate in purely social functions, such as picnics, suppers, dances. While they showed little interest in narrow special interest activities, they did support organizations and activities that addressed real community needs and concerns. They did not have the time to participate intensively because of illness, busy schedules and divergent interests. They were often overwhelmed by the pressures and challenges of starting over. Community members were not anxious to participate in experimental reforms as they simply wanted economic security.

Deshee Farms was a focus of animosity and sometimes called “Little Russia.” The floods of 1943 were physically and financially devastating to Deshee Farms. In 1945, at a special meeting, members voted to dissolve the corporation. Five families purchased individual farms from the FSA.

## **Ideal of Agrarian Life**

In contrast to urban workers, the farmer was imagined as representing the authentic American, a synthesis of hard labor, civic pride, autonomy, but with middle class sensibilities. Rural life was associated with nostalgia, sentimentality, hardiness and virility. Rural life was approaching mythic status in its importance to the nation’s founding and development. There was a belief that agrarian life must be preserved because of its centrality to American history and identity. There was also a belief that rural life was intrinsically superior to urban life. The idealization of agrarian life more often reflected sentimental values than contemporary realities. Even as the farmer as icon retained considerable symbolic power, the real life struggling farmer seemed external to the concerns of a growing commercial society. In a sense, the photos of struggling poor farmers are even more startling, suggesting a segment of society caught off guard.

One commentator suggests that the celebration of people during the Great Depression represented a search for a “coherent national character” that transcended divisions of class and religion. The FSA photos made a substantial contribution to the “cult of the people” which

emerged in the 1930s and was part of the New Deal democratization of American culture and a nation desiring stability and harmony in a tumultuous decade. Jack Delano defined the purpose of the photographic project as a “Search for the heart of the American people.” And he believed that the sentiment that united the FSA photographers was an effort to register “the pulse of the nation through its people.”

Others have said that the efforts of the FSA photographers also sought to capture:

- A pastoral ideal
- A sense of rootedness in the land
- The mythos of the American yeoman
- The rugged individualism of the farmer and rural family

Stryker also had a personal dream to create a pictorial encyclopedia of American agriculture to preserve what he felt was rapidly disappearing:

- Neighborliness
- Kinship with nature
- The spaciousness of the country
- A simpler, safer, peaceful way of life

There are many photographs of Indiana farmers near the crops they raised themselves. The symbolism of such photos is touching and convincing. An American farmer and his wife have survived hard times and the Great Depression and are now enjoying the results of their diligent work. There are photos of successful FSA clients who were able to better themselves and with an FSA loan to help their farm. The average FSA loan was \$412, with an average interest rate of 2.5%. Nationally, approximately 900,000 families received FSA loans.

## **Faces and Character**

Ansel Adams called the FSA photographers “a bunch of sociologists with cameras.” Others called them “Poets with cameras” or “Crusaders with cameras.” Stryker described the images as “dignity versus despair.” Other commentators have said that their efforts also sought to capture a sense of renewal or that individuals could rise above disaster and have the ability to regenerate themselves.

Ben Shahn noted that, “the poor who were rich in spirit” maintained “a transcendent indifference to their lot.” The cult of the common man was that they were poor in substance but rich in spirit. The FSA photos gave common people voices. Bernarda Shahn recalled her husband’s “glee that these people are so real and are so ordinary, and that in each one, in his ordinariness, is so markedly unique.” William Stott contends that the FSA photographers searched for the “look”

that encapsulated adversity, fortitude, pain and grace. In the Indiana photos you can easily find such photos that depict farmers showing the hardness of the Great Depression. There are photos of faces showing the strength and fortitude of farmers. There are also photos of homesteaders glowing with their appreciation and looking to the future. As with many of the FSA photos, portrait style photos shot in Indiana also included many of the following:

- Men on tractors
- Farmers showing their produce
- Families posing in front of their homes
- Women working in the kitchen or doing chores
- Families in the living room, reading or listening to the radio

One commentator remarked that, “With haunting permanence, the documentary venture of the 1930s fixed an ambivalent image in place. The dignity of the poor, closest to nature and simple virtue, graces the FSA photographs, but so does the indignation that such poverty should exist in a land of such rich resources.”

## **Women, Work and the Hearth**

Women encountered hostility in seeking employment with New Deal programs. For example, the Civilian Conservation Corps was established in 1933. The program was designed to conserve and develop the nation’s natural resources, primarily forests and soil, but also wildlife and water. At the peak of the program in 1935, the Civilian Conservation Corps had more than 500,000 enrollees in over 2,600 camps and provided work and training for a total of 3 million men. There were 80 Civilian Conservation Corps camps in Indiana. Women were excluded altogether in the original act. Only at Eleanor Roosevelt's insistence were eighty-six camps enrolling 8,500 women established before Congress eliminated them in 1937.

The Works Progress Administration was the first New Deal program to directly employ women. It hired widows, single women and those with absent husbands, and assigned them mostly to sewing projects. Women were also hired for the Works Progress Administration school lunch program, which served 900 million hot meals. Far fewer women were enrolled than men. Just 13.5 percent of Works Progress Administration employees were women in 1938, its top enrollment year. There are no photos in Indiana of woman working outside of rural settings or with heavy farm equipment.

While the farmer epitomized the Jeffersonian ideals of autonomy, virtue, and thrift, his wife was the ground upon which those ideals were realized. The Great Depression saw a return to domestic spaces. The household turned inward and women’s role at the center of the family took on an even greater significance. It was a reaffirming of the concept of the family as a domestic



interior space held together by women. Depression era women turned to housekeeping, a quintessentially American quality, to create stability and permanence in a struggling society. Women's identity was closely identified with the home and domesticity. Embracing homemaking was a sort of back to the home movement. Society equated women's identity with family and the home, an attempt to recapture an image of strength and an idealization of domestic sanctuary. Making do was a corner stone of the pioneer spirit and had been carried forward as a premier virtue on the American farm. Making do was an economic necessity and a rural tradition and custom highly valued by farm families. Self-sustenance could be a matter of enormous pride for farm women in the 1930s. Photos show women recreating domesticity in ways similar to pioneer women. There is the sense that those activities are necessary to family survival and to society at large. The central focus is usually on the kitchen and hearth. The hearth suggests stability and decency. Canning was a common FSA subject in photos. Such photos show the success of FSA clients, as well as capture the hearth and homemaking theme. FSA loans were often used to buy pressure cookers, which were called "precious cookers" and used to increase cash reserves by canning food. Washing clothes was a task that women had to endure, but canning and food preservation was work that women enjoyed. It was work that was valued for the skills it required and its contribution to the family and farm.

Other than Mary Lau, no other woman is identified by first name in the Indiana photos. Women are usually referred to as Mrs. so and so or the wife of, but not by their complete name. Mary Lau was a widow and farm owner with a small mortgage and that is why her name appears in captions. While women were important and valued, they still remained unnamed.

## **Houses and Farm Buildings**

The FSA photographers did take a fair number of photos of farm houses, barns and out buildings. It is a veritable collection of folk architecture. But they never considered themselves as cultural anthropologists and did not think of cataloging them for posterity like the researchers employed by the Federal Art Project that produced the *Index of American Design*. A photo of a decrepit barn could be a symbol of the problems of agriculture, but a photo of a new A-frame barn could be a symbol of agrarian self-sufficiency, a plentiful harvest or careful husbanding of resources. The barn and farmhouse assumed a central importance in the Historical Section's photographic collection. Dorothea Lange described the tobacco barn as a distinctive American architectural form. Creating an FSA photographic file of housing was also an interest of Stryker. Owning your own home was part of the American Dream, and as the Great Depression was winding down, the American Dream was starting to grow with the ending of World War II. In Indiana, the FSA photographers took photos of rural farm houses, shacks, trailers and assorted farm building.

## Leisure and Relaxation Activities

During the Great Depression, baseball was at the zenith of its popularity in terms of the number of people who played the game, including college players, town teams, industrial and semi pro leagues, soldiers, sandlot kids and prison teams. As a percentage of the population, more Americans were probably playing baseball in the 1930s than any time since. By 1937 the Works Progress Administration had spent about half a billion dollars, about 10% of its total expenditures on new parks and recreation, including the construction of baseball diamonds. The Works Progress Administration had built 3,600 baseball fields and 8,800 softball fields. There are two FSA photos of a baseball game in progress in Indiana. They were taken on Sunday, July 6, 1941 in Vincennes. The Double Cola softball team is playing at Washington Field (later named Inman Field) and spectators are enjoying the long holiday weekend. But the photos are of spectators outside the field, peeking in, perhaps suggesting that even the cost of admission to a ball game was beyond the financial means of many.

Bowling was seen as a working man's sport. Bowling received significant coverage in the 1930s. Newspapers in particular devoted large amounts of space to player's averages and scores. In 1934, New York City served as host to the International Bowling Associations' Annual Tournament. At the national level, churches, schools, office and industries all sponsored leagues. The number of officially sanctioned alleys rose from 450 in 1920 to 2,000 in 1929. But it was not until after World War II with the rise of suburban shopping complexes that bowling received the respectability it wanted and its greatest popularity. The Indiana photos of young adults enjoying bowling are from 1940. Picnics were a popular FSA subject in Indiana, as well as reading the newspaper, eating ice cream, sitting on the porch, listening to the radio, shooting pool and playing cards. You can find many Indiana photos with Hoosiers enjoying those activities.

## Afro-Americans

In 1930, only 3.5% of Indiana's population was Afro-American. For the rural population it was .6% and only .3% was classified as rural-farm. There are some Indiana photos that include Afro-Americans. Eight are in the Indianapolis Greyhound Bus station taken by Esther Bubley in 1943. Most of the photos that include Afro-Americans were taken by Frank Delano at the U. S. Army Chaplain School at Fort Benjamin Harrison in 1942. There are no photos of Afro-Americans in rural scenes in Indiana, unlike the FSA photos taken in the South. Between 1935 and 1941, over 20% of the images produced by the FSA photographers in the South had images of Afro-Americans.



## The Changing Face of Rural America

The idea of government acting to remove farm families and withdraw land from production must have seemed very foreign to farmers, since state and federal governments had been working for 70 years to do the opposite. The efforts were a modest success at best.

Net farm income more than doubled from \$2 billion to 4.6 billion between 1932 and 1939. But farm income only reached 1929 levels twice before 1940. And on the eve of World War II, 2.4 million American farmers, 39%, still rented their land.

Historian David Kennedy concluded that “farmers tried to sustain their income with higher volume, tilled more acres, lay on more fertilizer, bought more tractors and seed drills, and carried larger crops to market. And as a result collective misery, not the common good, was the bitter fruit of free market striving by farmers.”

David Danborn contends that President Roosevelt “financed the FSA with conscience money, out of guilt for leaving borderline farmers behind, performing a sort of agricultural triage, saving a handful of relatively promising farmers and letting the rest go.”

Anthony Badger describes the New Deal as a holding operation until the recovery arrived with the start of World War II. Until that time, “the nation’s primary agricultural problems still remained underemployment, substandard living conditions, soil erosion, flat commodity prices, and surpluses.”

By the 1940s and the coming of World War II, social and economic circumstances had changed considerably. An estimated five million farm people left the countryside for urban areas between 1940 and 1945, more than any other five year period in the 20th century. The farm population fell from 30.5 million to 24.4 million between 1929 and 1945, a drop from 25% to 18% of the population.

The total number of Indiana farms which had doubled in the last half of the 19th century, decreased by over half in the 20th century. By 1980 there were 88,000 farms in Indiana, fewer than in 1850. The size of an Indiana farm was 103 acres in 1920 and 193 in 1980. The average homestead in the four plains states increased from 390 acres in 1930 to 496 in 1945, an increase of 22% in 15 years, and the total amount of farm land grew by 5%.

Beginning in the mid-1930s tractor sales increased rapidly and the number of tractors in use doubled during the decade. Fifty-five percent of plains farmers had tractors. The percent of farms with tractors in Indiana was 4% in 1920, 22% in 1930 and 37% in 1940. The total number of tractors on Kansas farms increased from 49,798 in 1933 to 87,515 in 1940 and during the same period the number of combines increased from 24,197 to 41,572. The total number of combines in the United States increased dramatically from 4,000 in 1920 to 90,000 in 1937. It was not so

much as result of the prices of tractors coming down, although they did as Ford Motor Company, John Deere and International Harvester competed with each other, but because of three technological advances. A power lift made it possible for an implement to be raised at every turn by pulling a lever. Rubber tires replaced steel wheels. And diesel engines replaced gas engines.

By the late 1930s the technology had achieved a dominant design of a general all-purpose tractor that did not change for the next 30 years, except in size and horsepower. It allowed farmers to expand the size of their farms and required less manpower per acre. The number of man-hours required to grow and harvest an acre of wheat declined from 10.5 in the late 1920s to 7.5 during World War II. The tractor symbolized the modern farmer, representing the transition from farmer as worker to farmer as manager. It was an emblem of farm prosperity and modernity. Horse farming was becoming a mark of poverty and backwardness.

As the United States entered World War II the focus was back on increasing production as rapidly as possible for the war effort. The image of the farmer went from relief client to national asset. Between 1940 and 1945 federal programs generated over one third of the nation's agriculture and farm income tripled. What changed the face of farming were:

- Increased acreage of farms
- Greater capital investment
- Rising farm productivity
- Advances in mechanization and technology
- Consolidation of small farms into larger holdings

The legacy was that it was hard to dismantle many of the programs, such as subsidies, even as the family farm gave way to agribusiness. At the start of the 21st century, 70% of subsidies went to large farms. During the 1920s the family farm was the American ideal. By the 1940s, it was changing from a way of life to a business. The family farm system of agriculture, long idealized as America's spirit, was transformed by intensive technology, increased commodity specialization, absorption into national consumer markets and a reorganization of labor. Family farming was no longer the same, even for farms that were family operated. To survive in the new world of agribusiness, farm families had to develop new strategies.